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The dynamics of issue salience and voting: did the refugee crisis affect turnout in European national elections?

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Abstract

The European refugee crisis caused an unprecedented rise in the salience of refugees and immigration policy across European countries, with the issue of refugees and immigration suddenly dominating all facets of political life. This paper investigates the effect of this phenomenon on political behaviour, particularly citizens' decision to vote in national elections across Europe. It proposes that the refugee crisis raised the salience of immigration policy and made it a dominant policy issue in elections, which reduced indifference-based abstention. This resulted in an increase in overall turnout in European national elections held following the onset of the refugee crisis. To confirm this proposal, this paper employs two empirical tests. First, it investigates whether a positive correlation exists between changes in turnout and perceived immigration policy salience. Following this, a more rigorous empirical test is performed on individual-level data from the European Social Survey in five countries, investigating the relationship between changes in voting habits and attitudes towards refugees and immigration. The results of the two test confirm the hypothesis that the refugee crisis impacted electoral turnout through reducing indifference based abstention. However, it must also be emphasised that this effect appears to be conditional upon the thematization of the issue, meaning the extent to which refugee and immigration policies actually structured electoral competition. While this conclusion clearly contributes to the understanding of issue-based electoral participation decisions and provides additional proof of the significant effect of policies on turnout levels, future studies employing more rigorous statistical methods, expanded dataset including more countries, and individual-level panel data would significantly further our understanding of the effects of changes in policy salience on political participation dynamics.

Keywords: electoral turnout, indifference-based abstention, issue salience, political participation, refugee crisis, political behaviour

Introduction

The refugee crisis generated an unprecedented increase in citizens' perceptions of the importance of refugees and immigration issues across European countries. As voters grew increasingly concerned, refugee and immigration policy discussions became a predominant feature of electoral campaigns, potentially enabling the strong emotion-based reactions

evoked by the immigration issue to translate into political action (Brader et al., 2008: 959). As an illustration of this process, the increased turnout and support for the ruling party Fidesz in the Hungarian elections of April 2018 are generally attributed to immense propaganda campaign of government-controlled media centred around refugees and immigration issues, which raised feeling of insecurity and anxiety in a massive portion of the electorate (Santora, 2018). This example demonstrates how crucial it is to understand the consequences of such an unprecedentedly large and rapid increase in issue salience for the central indicator of political engagement, turnout.

The unprecedented increase in the salience of refugees and immigration issues arguably affected voter turnout through changing indifference-based abstention dynamics. The immense rise in citizens' concern with immigration issue following the onset of the refugee crisis in 2015 is shown by the scale of changes in perceived issue salience across European Union countries. In May 2014, 15 per cent of EU citizens believed immigration to be among the two most important issues facing their country, and only 2 per cent mentioned terrorism, an issue closely associated with the refugee crisis (Eurobarometer, 2014). In May 2016, the EU averages were 28 per cent and 15 per cent respectively, indicating that in the ranking of 13 issues, immigration rose from 4th to 2nd, while terrorism from 13th to 4th (Eurobarometer, 2014; Eurobarometer, 2016). This suggests a very substantial fall in indifference towards the immigration issue, as the increase in the number of immigrants, and elite and media cues interacted to increase pro- and anti-immigration sentiments (Dunaway et al., 2010: 359; Gabel, Scheve, 2007: 1013; McCombs, Shaw, 1972: 176). As a result, refugee and immigration policy came to be a core issue in public debate, and therefore in elections across Europe.

The central hypothesis of this study is therefore that with the fall in indifference towards immigration resulting from the refugee crisis, indifference-based abstention decreased as well, generating higher aggregate turnout. Based on rational choice theory's account of issues' influence on citizens' probability of voting, this paper argues that by raising the perceived issue salience of refugee and immigration policy and structuring party competition, the European refugee crisis increased the likelihood of individuals with strong policy preferences in immigration deciding to vote, and thus aggregate turnout.

This paper contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of issue-based participation, a largely neglected field of analysis. By employing a novel empirical method to measure the effects of issue salience increase for individuals' decision to vote, it provides additional insights. Furthermore, due to its comparative analysis of European countries' election dynamics, it contributes to our understanding of cross-country differences.

Literature review

Aggregate turnout in national elections indicates citizens' willingness to participate in the political decision-making process of a country. Harder and Krosnick identify three classes of

determinants of turnout: ability to vote, motivation to vote, and difficulty of acquiring the required information and casting the ballot (Harder, Krosnick, 2008: 525). These categories incorporate sociodemographic, attitudinal and institutional factors (Wolfinger, Rosenstone, 1980: 1, 62; Blais, Carty, 1990: 167). Among these one often neglected and not well-understood determinant of individuals' decision to vote is the effect of the issues featured in election campaigns, which this paper investigates (Adams et al., 2006: 66). To do this, this section reviews the existing literature on firstly, issue voting; secondly, the theoretical framework for analysis of issue-based participation choice; and lastly, the previous empirical studies on issue-based participation.

The role of issues in deciding vote choice

Issue-based participation and vote choice are strongly connected, as voters' decision in elections can be conceived of as a sequential process of two stages: firstly, the decision on the most preferred candidate, and secondly, the decision on whether to vote or abstain (Riker, Ordeshook, 1973: 308). Since RePass's influential piece on the existence of issue voting (RePass, 1971: 400), the consensus emerged that issue voting occurs infrequently and its influence on candidate choice varies across elections (Campbell et al., 1960: 187). Issue-voting is more likely in times of economic and social turmoil (Nie et al., 1976: 156-93), and when the dominant issues in election campaigns are so called easy issues, as distinguished by Carmines and Stimson (1980). While hard-issue voting requires a sophisticated analysis incorporating conscious calculations of the costs and benefits of alternative policies, easy-issue voting occurs when a certain issue evokes gut responses from citizens (Carmines, Stimson, 1980: 78). Easy issues tend to be symbolic rather than pragmatic, concerned more with policy ends than means, and have long been on governments' policy agendas, even if their increase in salience was recent (Carmines, Stimson, 1980: 80-81). Therefore, all citizens engage in easy-issue voting, irrespective of voter sophistication or education levels (Carmines, Stimson, 1980: 88).

Issue voting is also more likely to occur when the salience of an issue area increases drastically, as exemplified by policy voting on the Vietnam war in the 1968 U.S. presidential election and on the Iraq war in the 2004 election, even if low candidate competition and candidate convergence on the issues reduced this effect (Page, Brody, 1972: 993-994; Verba, Brody, 1970; Gelpi et al., 2007: 171). This suggests that issue voting is likely to have occurred on immigration policy following the onset of the crisis, and thus could have potentially influenced on turnout as well.

Rational choice theory and issue-based abstention

The theoretical framework that supports the proposition that issue salience influences individuals' decision to vote is rooted in rational choice theory. Downs (1957) conceived of voting as a rational act whereby individuals are motivated to influence the outcome of an election, which the post-election policies form part of. They therefore vote for the candidate whose policies are closest to their preferences (Downs, 1957: 146). Downs's central paradox of voting originates from the recognition that due to the perceived near-improbability of their

vote deciding the outcome of the election, it is rational for voters to abstain as the opportunity cost of voting exceeds the negligible potential benefit (Downs, 1957: 146-7). Riker and Ordeshook (1968) aim to circumvent this paradox by developing their calculus of voting. This suggests that the choice to vote (R) depends on the voter's utility if their preferred candidate is elected (B), the perceived probability of their vote being decisive (P), the opportunity cost of voting (C), and the D -term, which is introduced to measure the voter's utility from voting that is unrelated to the outcome (D), so that $R = PB + D - C$ (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968: 25, 28). Voting has investment and consumption benefits, the former connected to the outcome of the election and denoted by term B , the latter representing the satisfaction derived from the act of voting, and denoted by the D -term (Blais, 2000: 4).

In the rational choice framework, two different motives for abstention exist, which are both partially policy-based: indifference and alienation (Brody, Page, 1973: 2-3). Alienation-based abstention relates to the expressive benefits of voting contained in the D -term, and occurs when the voter's perceived distance from their most preferred candidate in policy preferences is so far that they see no benefit of voting (Brody, Page, 1973: 3). Indifference-based abstention on the other hand relates to the term B , and occurs when individuals perceive little difference in the attractiveness of candidates as the candidates' policy positions are exceedingly close (Brody, Page, 1973: 2). Both abstention motives relate to the core issues in election campaigns, which are therefore crucial determinants of the decision to vote.

Empirical studies on issue-based abstention

Empirical studies universally find that perceptions of issue salience are significant determinants of abstention. Yet, these studies are surprisingly scarce, and inconclusive on the different effects of indifference and alienation and their exact determinants (Adams et al., 2006: 66).

The first such empirical study (Zipp, 1985) measured voter indifference and alienation by the policy distance between voters and candidates. Using 1968-80 U.S. presidential election data, Zipp performed multivariate logistic regression with controls for sociodemographic and attitudinal variables, and found that policy-specific indifference and alienation were significant determinants of participation choice, with indifference having a more substantive effect (Zipp, 1985: 52-53, 59). Plane and Gershtenson (2004) arrive at similar conclusions based on U.S. midterm data, but find alienation-based abstention stronger (Plane, Gershtenson, 2004: 88-89). Katz (2007) finds the effect of indifference-based abstention more substantial in Brazil's 2002 presidential election (Katz, 2007: 21-22).

Adams, Down, and Merrill (2006) inquire into the different effect of alienation and indifference, and provide further evidence by applying a unified model of turnout and vote choice to 1980-88 U.S. presidential election data, and performing computer simulations to model hypothetical scenarios (Adams et al., 2006: 65). After finding significant effects for both indifference and alienation, they compute the expected indifference, alienation and aggregate turnout for four hypothetical scenarios, from convergence to extreme polarisation

of candidates' policy positions (Adams et al., 2006: 74, 80-81). They find that both indifference and alienation depress turnout, but while the former is induced by convergence, the latter is evoked through polarisation (Adams et al., 2006: 81-82).

Most notably for this paper's purpose, Thurner and Eymann's (2000) find that in the 1990 German election the only statistically significant issue area affecting abstention was immigration (Thurner, Eymann, 2000: 72). Using a unified spatial model and measuring alienation and indifference with policy distances, they estimate the salience of the four prominent issue areas: German unification, immigration policy, nuclear energy, and abortion (Thurner, Eymann, 2000: 55-58, 67). Surprisingly, they find that only indifference towards immigration had statistically significant effect on participation choice (Thurner, Eymann, 2000: 69-70), which could be explained by the large-scale Turkish immigration and integration issues at the time (Martin, 1991: 21-22). The finding that only indifference towards immigration increased the probability of abstention significantly reinforces the validity of this paper's problem identification, and is highly promising.

This study contributes to this empirical literature, and further the understanding of issue-driven electoral participation dynamics, an area where empirical studies remain surprisingly scarce. Furthermore, using a new empirical method of examining changes in turnout and issue salience, it also seeks to contribute to the understanding of the consequences of an unprecedented increase in salience of an issue area for political participation. Finally, as the European refugee crisis possesses the rare characteristic that its salience rose in similar magnitudes simultaneously in numerous countries, insightful cross-country comparisons are also possible.

Theoretical framework

This study proposes that the European refugee crisis reduced indifference-based abstention in European national elections during the crisis. As the perceived salience of refugee and immigration issues rose, individuals developed strong policy preferences. The future governments' policies implemented to deal with the refugee crisis became a primary concern of citizens and a prominent issue in election campaigns, with candidates representing often very different policy agendas, which further reduced indifference. Due to the strong concern of the electorate and the vast differences in possible policy outcomes, citizens' issue-based indifference to the election outcome dropped, and seldom-voters also became motivated to participate. While those few who remained indifferent towards immigration issue may have become more likely to abstain due to the strong one-issue focus of some campaigns, they could still base their participation choice on other issues or non-issue factors, and thus this effect was not sufficiently strong to counteract the fall in indifference-based abstention. Therefore, higher aggregate turnout resulted.

This paper adopts a spatial model of voting based on Downsian rational choice theory (1957) and Riker and Ordeshook's (1973) calculus of voting. According to this model, individuals

decide whether to vote or not through a rational evaluation of its benefits and costs. Voters' expected utility from voting depends on how much difference they believe the possible outcomes of the election would make to them (Brody, Page, 1973: 2). If they perceive the alternative refugees and immigration policy outcomes as yielding significantly different utility levels, they are less likely to abstain due to indifference.

For refugees and immigration issue salience to reduce indifference-based abstention, two criteria must be satisfied: firstly, the refugees and immigration policy implemented after the election must feature in citizens' evaluation of the costs and benefits of voting; secondly, the candidates' policy proposals must yield citizens very different expected utility levels. This study argues that both criteria are satisfied.

Concerning the first, there are three reasons: the issue salience of immigration for citizens; the thematization of the issue by parties; and the easy-issue nature of the problem itself. As demonstrated by results from the Eurobarometer surveys, immigration suddenly became a primary issue concern for a large segment of the electorate in European countries following the onset of the refugee crisis. As the issues citizens are concerned about structure election campaigns (Petrocik et al., 2003: 599), refugees and immigration policy became a key issue on which candidates proposed different policy alternatives, enabling perceptions of issue salience to translate into policy concerns. This effect was amplified by the irreversibility and far-reaching long-term consequences of the refugees and immigration policy decisions. The fact that the refugees and immigration policies adopted after the election to manage the crisis could drastically and permanently transform the society, economy, and political landscape of the country magnified the importance of influencing the outcome through voting. This effect was further aided by the easy-issue characteristics of immigration. It displays the easy-issue characteristics Carmines and Stimson (1980) identify: it evokes emotional reactions, 'gut responses' from voters, it is symbolic not pragmatic, and concerned with policy ends, not means (i.e. not the specifics of how border control should be strengthened to impede illegal border crossing by refugees, but the fact that it should be). Therefore, even those citizens who do not typically base their participation choice on hard issues such as macroeconomic or social policy became more likely to consider this one issue when deciding whether to vote.

The second criterion that candidates proposed vastly different policies was also satisfied, as due to the divisiveness of the immigration issue and lack of society-wide consensus on the basic governing principles of policy-making, candidates assumed easily identifiable and polarised positions, which generated strong electoral competition. As Page and Brody showed regarding the Vietnam war issue, under low electoral competition issue-driven electoral behaviour occurs less (Page, Brody, 1972: 993-994). However, for the refugee crisis the contrary was the case. Owing to the highly polarised public opinion, candidates assumed positions that spanned the whole scale from extremely generous to extremely restrictive refugee policy. Consequently, it increasingly mattered for citizens whose policy proposals get implemented, and the likelihood of abstention due to indifference fell.

Research Design

Two empirical tests are developed to assess the proposition outlined above. The first test verifies the existence of a link between perceptions of immigration issue salience and aggregate election turnout across countries. The second test analyses the dynamics of turnout change within countries, seeking to confirm that the propensity to vote rose among citizens not indifferent towards refugees and immigration policy.

The first empirical test

The dataset is comprised of European Union countries which held national elections during the European refugee crisis. The span of the European refugee crisis is identified based on monthly number of asylum applicants to EU countries. In June 2015, the number of asylum applicants to EU countries rose drastically from 73,040 to 95,945, and averaged at 126,009 monthly applicants until September 2016, when it fell below 100,000 (Eurostat, Asylum applicants). Therefore, the period of the refugee crisis is identified as between June 1st 2015 and September 1st 2016.

The dependent variable is changes in turnout from the national election directly preceding the onset of the refugee crisis to the one during the refugee crisis, with data obtained from the IFES Election Guide. In all countries the two elections compared are of the same type (i.e. presidential or legislative), and in Austria's two-round presidential elections turnout statistics from the 2nd round are included. The independent variable is citizens' perceptions of their country's affectedness by the refugee crisis, as measured by the changes in citizens' perceptions of the immigration issue's salience. Data is from the Eurobarometer 81 and 85 surveys from May 2014 and May 2016, in which respondents answered the question '*What do you think are the two most important issues facing [our country] at the moment?*'. This measure can be utilised as self-reporting is an adequate measure of issue salience in the study of mass political behaviour (Epstein, Segal, 2000: 66-67). Changes in perceptions of salience are calculated from the difference in the proportion of citizens mentioning immigration. The relationship between the independent and dependent variables is visualised with a scatter plot with trendline. Analysing changes in the variables instead of their levels enables the exclusion of the effect of various country-specific factors, assuming they have not changed drastically in the given period in the examined countries. While other determinants of turnout could confound the result and causality is far from proven, if a positive aggregate-level relationship is visible, deeper individual-level analysis is justified.

The second empirical test

The second empirical test is performed to establish whether non-indifference towards refugee policy was an individual-level determinant of decision to vote in elections. Data is available from the European Social Survey Round 7 and 8, for which surveying occurred close before and after the onset of the refugee crisis¹. Of the 14 EU countries in both ESS datasets,

¹ For ESS7 between 01.09.2014-31.12.2014, for ESS8 between 01.09.2016-31.12.2016.

analysis is restricted to five - Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Poland and the United Kingdom -, as only these held national elections between the start of data collection for ESS8, and the start of the European refugee crisis on 1st June 2015.

The dependent variable is the response to the question '*Some people don't vote nowadays for one reason or another. Did you vote in the last [country] national election in [month/year]?*'. The independent variable is the response on a five-level Likert scale to the proposition '*The government should be generous in judging people's applications for refugee status.*' The response '*Neither agree nor disagree*' indicates indifference or uncertainty regarding one's position, which both suggest that refugees and immigration policy preferences did not feature in the respondent's decision to vote. '*Agree strongly*' and '*Agree*', and '*Disagree strongly*' and '*Disagree*' are aggregated to denote pro-immigration and anti-immigration policy preferences. Changes in turnout are compared between these three groups in each country. The results are explored with descriptive statistics and visualised. Stronger relationship is expected in countries with more drastic immigration issue salience increase, as given by the independent variable of the first test.

The primary possible impediment to observing the expected relationship is if other issues gained in prominence as well between the two elections in some countries. These would impact the issue focus of campaigns, and obscure the effect of the refugee crisis. Such possibilities are explored qualitatively. Furthermore, the statistical analysis is restricted for two reasons. Firstly, as consecutive ESS survey rounds do not survey the same respondents, whether individuals' participation choice changed after the onset of the crisis cannot be tested. Secondly, logistic regression on ESS8 data to determine whether indifference to refugee policy significantly increased individuals' likelihood of voting during the crisis is beyond the scope of this study for two reasons. Firstly, it would necessitate a wide range of controls with extensive information on individual countries' electoral systems, and social and political landscapes. Moreover, candidates and voters would have to be placed on policy preference scales on the primary policy focuses in each individual election. Therefore, this analysis is restricted to descriptive statistics, and alternative explanations are explored qualitatively.

Empirical Analysis

Results of the first empirical test

Changes in turnout and in the percentage of population perceiving immigration as one of the two most important issues facing their country is presented in Table I (detailed data is disclosed in Appendix A). In all countries except the UK immigration issue salience increased and in some more than an additional 25 per cent of the population began to perceive immigration as a salient issue. The slight fall in the UK is attributable to the fact that immigration was already a highly salient issue before the crisis due to high immigration rates from within and outside the EU (Eurostat, Population). In 2014, immigration salience was highest of the 15 countries in the UK with 41 per cent, and still second highest in 2016 with

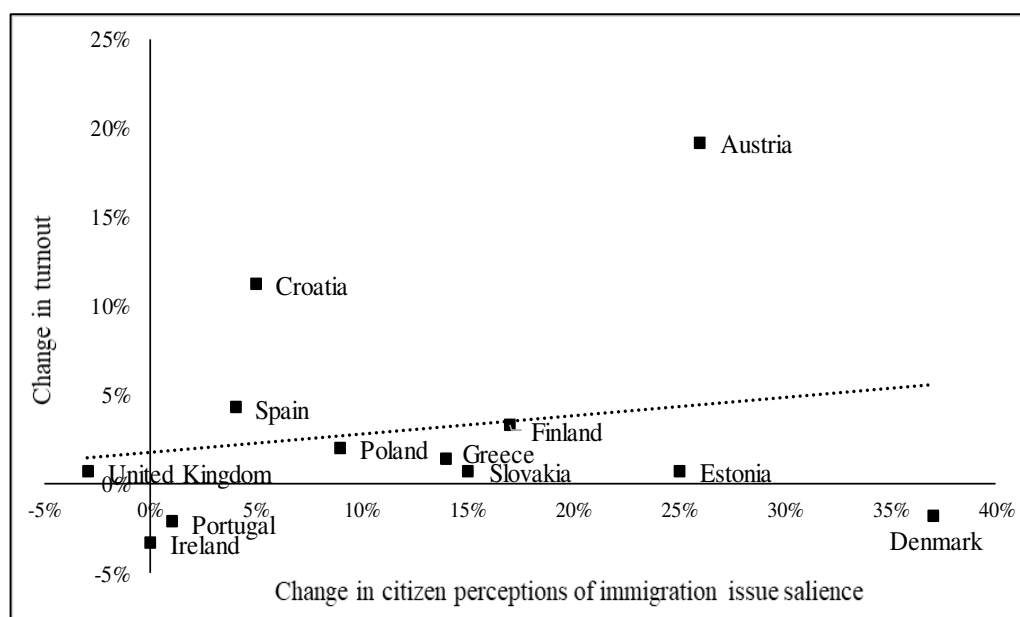
38 per cent. For completeness, the same analysis was performed with monthly per capita asylum applicants as independent variable, which highlights the divergence in the reality and perceptions of how affected a country was by the refugee crisis (Appendix B).

Table I: Changes in perceptions of immigration issue salience and turnout in 15 EU countries directly before and during the European refugee crisis

Country	Changes in citizens' perception of issue salience of immigration, 05.2014-05.2016	Change in turnout
Austria	26%	19.2%
Croatia	5%	11.2%
Cyprus	6%	-12.0%
Denmark	37%	-1.9%
Estonia	25%	0.7%
Finland	17%	3.3%
Greece	14%	1.4%
Ireland	0%	-3.3%
Poland	9%	2.0%
Portugal	1%	-2.2%
Slovakia	15%	0.7%
Spain	4%	4.3%
United Kingdom	-3%	0.7%

The scatterplot of the results shows that changes in citizens' perception of immigration issue salience and aggregate turnout are positively correlated. Cyprus was removed as an outlier, which is justified as in its 2016 national election abstention reached record levels due to disillusionment with the country's 2013 financial meltdown, and immigration did not feature in campaigns (Deloy, 2016a; Kambas, 2016). Results including Cyprus are disclosed in Appendix C. Despite the extreme result, Austria remains in the sample as refugees and immigration policy was the most prominent issue in its 2016 presidential election (Deloy, 2016b). While dispersion of the cases is relatively high, the scatterplot's positive trendline is promising for the validity of the paper's proposition.

Figure I: Change in turnout and in immigration issue salience in elections directly before and during the European refugee crisis in 15 EU member states



Results of the second empirical test

Table II presents the calculated changes in turnout per country for all three groups of respondents divided based on attitudes towards refugee policy. As Figure II shows (see next page), the expectation of higher increases in turnout among those non-indifferent towards refugee policy can be observed in Poland and the UK (more detailed data disclosed in Appendix D).

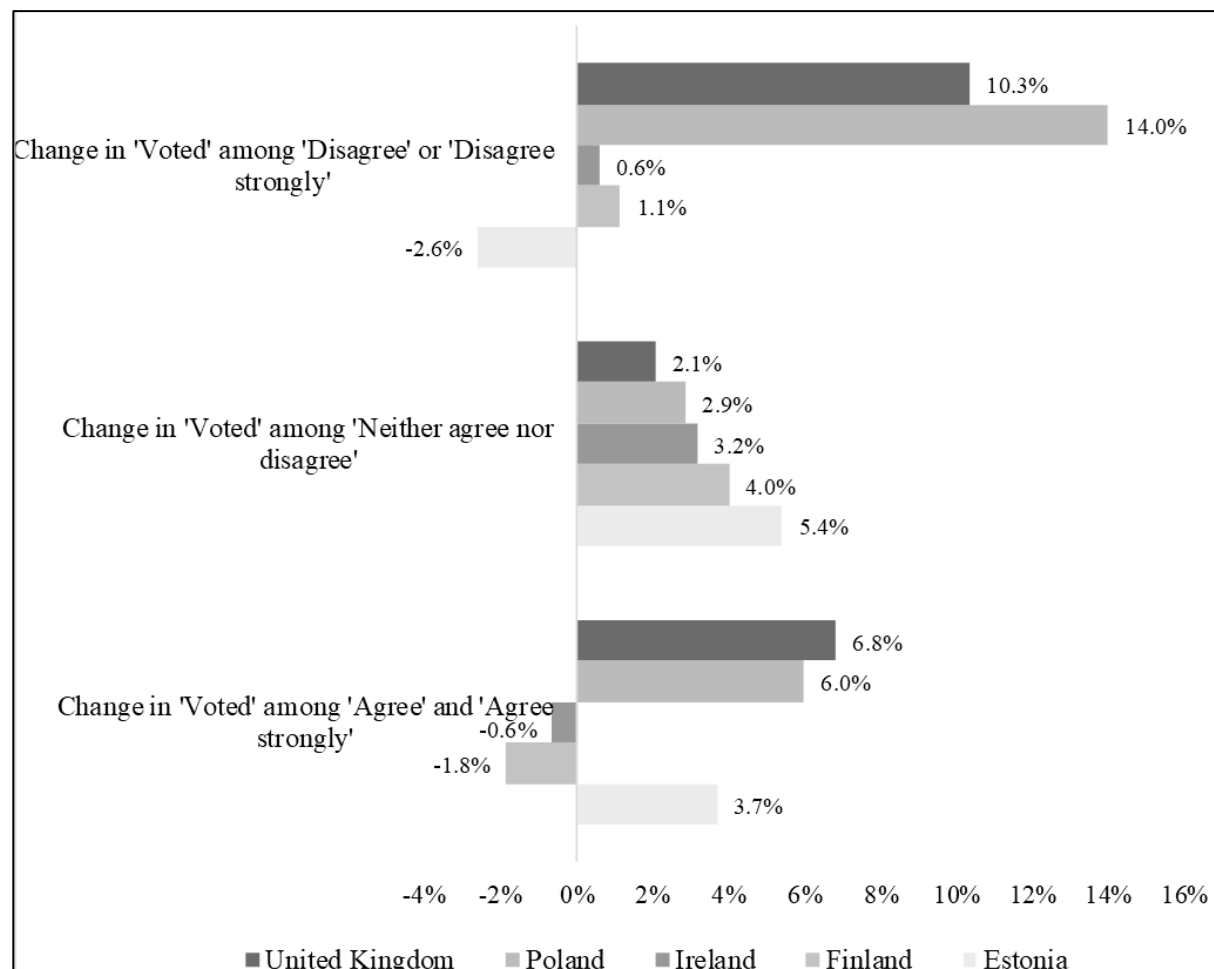
Table II: Changes in turnout in groups of citizens based on attitudes towards refugees and immigration policy for five EU member states

	Estonia	Finland	Ireland	Poland	United Kingdom
Change in 'Voted' responses among 'Agree' and 'Agree strongly'	3.7%	-1.8%	-0.6%	6.0%	6.8%
Change in 'Voted' responses among 'Neither agree nor disagree'	5.4%	4.0%	3.2%	2.9%	2.1%
Change in 'Voted' responses among 'Disagree' or 'Disagree strongly'	-2.6%	1.1%	0.6%	14.0%	10.3%
Overall change 'Voted' responses	1.9%	0.5%	0.4%	5.1%	6.7%

While these results are contrary to expectations of stronger relationships in countries with a greater rise in the salience of the immigration issue, qualitative evidence on the issue focuses

of the five countries' campaigns in the elections during the refugee crisis explains observed patterns. While in the UK and Poland, refugees and immigration policy featured strongly in campaigns, the Estonia, Finland and Ireland other issues dominated. In Estonia, campaigns were focused on policy responses to security threats engendered by the Russian annexation of Crimea (Sikk, 2016: 100). In Finland, political debate centred around the economy, social and health services, and security policy (Raunio, 2015), while in Ireland economic issues took central stage (McDonald, 2016). In the UK, immigration, the NHS and the EU were the pivotal campaign issues (YouGov, 2015; Wilkinson, 2015). However, it is worth noting that in the UK immigration from EU countries was also an important issue concern of the electorate, which was unconnected to the refugee crisis (Blinder, 2016). This could have contributed to the fall in indifference towards refugee and immigration policy, indicating that the results may not be exclusively due to the refugee crisis. In Poland, political debate was indeed focused on the refugee crisis and immigration, with these issues becoming extremely central in public attention (Cienski, 2015). Poland's example is therefore a strong confirmation of this paper's hypothesis. These results strongly suggest a causal relationship between the rise in immigration issue salience generated by the European refugee crisis and fall in indifference-based abstention.

Figure II: Changes in turnout in groups of citizens based on attitudes towards refugees and immigration policy for five EU member states



Robustness of results

Finally, alternative explanations of the observed patterns are refuted to gain final proof of causality. Firstly, the increase in citizens' perceptions of immigration issue salience is directly attributable to the refugee crisis, as no other major EU-wide event occurred that could have caused similar shifts in public attitude. While migration within the EU could have strengthened anti-immigration attitudes in Western European countries, there was no substantial increase in within-EU labour movements between 2014 and 2016 (Eurostat, Population), and the Eurobarometer shows no clear differences in immigration issue salience perceptions between countries with positive and negative net within-EU migration flows (Table I).

Secondly, the increased issue salience of refugee and immigration policy reduced indifference-based abstention, increasing aggregate turnout. The second empirical test proves that turnout rose most among those non-indifferent towards immigration in countries where refugees and immigration policy were key policy issues of the elections. Past theoretical and empirical literature outlined previously rejects the existence of intervening variables between fall in indifference and increase in likelihood of voting. A confounding variable that jointly reduced indifference towards refugees and immigration policy and increased the likelihood of voting among those not indifferent towards these policy areas could have been the rise in popularity of far-right parties (Tartar, 2017). It could be argued that turnout increased as previously alienated voters finally felt that a party represented their interests and decided to vote, while other voters who did not support far-right parties turned out to impede their success. According to this argument, the fall in indifference towards refugees and immigration policy was also the result of the rise of far-right parties, and not the key driver of increased turnout. However, as recent empirical research suggests, it is predominantly the rise of anti-immigration policy preferences that increases the popularity of far-right parties. While these parties can further strengthen anti-immigration attitudes in the population, this effect works predominantly in the opposite direction (Podobnik et al., 2017: 1). Therefore, this alternative explanation is also refuted.

Conclusion

While the spatial voting literature has long ago developed the theoretical framework for analysing policy-based abstention, empirical studies have remained scarce. By considering the effect of the rise in salience of a particular issue - that of immigration - this paper contributes to closing this gap.

The empirical analysis did confirm the initial hypothesis that the refugee crisis raised aggregate turnout through reducing indifference-based abstention. However, this effect was not universally true for all elections during the refugee crisis, and crucially depended on a further criterion, namely whether refugees and immigration policy was a key policy focus of election campaigns on which candidates assumed highly divergent positions. Out of the five countries examined more closely, this condition was clearly fulfilled only in the case of

Poland and the UK, where the expected relationship was clearly observable (even if the UK results should be interpreted cautiously). In Estonia, Finland and Ireland other policies took central stage in election campaigns, which clearly explains why the expected relationship was not observable. Therefore, the major finding of the paper confirms the hypothesis that the refugee crisis had the capacity to reduce indifference-based abstention. However, this effect appears to be conditional upon the thematization of the issue, meaning the extent to which refugee and immigration policies actually structured electoral competition.

While this conclusion clearly contributes to the understanding of issue-based electoral participation decisions and provides further proof of the significant effect of policies on turnout levels, the empirical analysis was restricted, and there remains substantial room for progress. Concerning statistical methods, multivariate logistic regression controlling for other determinants of participation choice would enable considerably more robust findings. Modelling voter's decision as a sequential process of candidate and participation choice could also add further robustness, and enable more precise approximation of issue-based effects. Survey data tracking the same respondents in consecutive surveying rounds would allow the testing of whether voters who ceased to be indifferent towards refugees and immigration policy indeed became more likely to vote. Individual-level data for all 15 EU countries that held national elections during the refugee crisis would have also been more insightful. Furthermore, more extensive analysis of the Polish and UK national elections and the precise ways in which the refugee policy salience affected individuals' decision to vote could provide further valuable insights.

The major finding of the paper allows for a not particularly encouraging interpretation concerning the imperfections of democracy. While it does reaffirm the existence of issue-based motivation to vote, seemingly it is the easy-issue characteristics of refugees and immigration policy, evoking emotion-based 'gut responses', that motivates individuals to vote, rather than conscious, informed opinion formation and analysis of different policy alternatives. This finding is particularly worrisome concerning refugees and immigration policy, since future integrative policies necessitate citizen support that rests on the sound foundations of citizen opinions formed via meaningful and informed political engagement. It is a major responsibility of politicians to engage citizens meaningfully, enhancing the quality of political debates and discussions rather than feeding fear and prejudice.

Appendices

Appendix A: Dataset for first empirical test

Table AI: Turnout data for the 15 EU countries

Country	Election directly preceding the start of the refugee crisis			Election during the refugee crisis			Turnout change (%)
	Date	Type	Turnout	Date	Type	Turnout	

			(%)			(%)	
Austria	25.04.2010	president	53.57	22.05.2016	president	72.75	19.18
Croatia	04.12.2011	legislative	54.32	08.11.2015	legislative	65.51	11.19
Cyprus	22.05.2011	legislative	78.7	22.05.2016	legislative	66.74	-11.96
Denmark	15.09.2011	legislative	87.74	18.06.2015	legislative	85.89	-1.85
Estonia	06.03.2011	legislative	63.53	01.03.2015	legislative	64.23	0.7
Finland	17.04.2011	legislative	67.32	19.04.2015	legislative	70.64	3.32
Greece	17.06.2012	legislative	62.49	25.01.2015	legislative	63.87	1.38
Ireland	25.02.2011	legislative	69.9	26.02.2016	legislative	66.6	-3.3
Poland	09.10.2011	legislative	48.92	25.10.2015	legislative	50.92	2
Portugal	05.06.2011	Legislative	58.03	04.10.2015	legislative	55.86	-2.17
Slovakia	10.03.2012	legislative	59.11	05.03.2016	legislative	59.82	0.71
Spain	20.11.2011	legislative	68.94	20.12.2015	legislative	73.2	4.26
United Kingdom	06.05.2010	legislative	65.44	07.05.2015	legislative	66.12	0.68

Table AII: Data on immigration issue salience for the 15 EU countries

Country	% of population mentioning immigration as one of the two most important issues facing their country (%)		Change in % of population (%)	Place of immigration issue in issue importance ranking		Change in ranking
	2014	2016		2014	2016	
Austria	15	41	26	7	1	6
Croatia	1	6	5	10	8	2
Cyprus	3	9	6	8	5	3
Denmark	20	57	37	6	1	5
Estonia	5	30	25	10	1	9
Finland	6	23	17	9	5	4
Greece	6	20	14	8	4	4
Ireland	7	7	0	9	8	1
Poland	7	16	9	7	6	1
Portugal	2	3	1	10	9	1
Slovakia	2	17	15	11	4	7
Spain	5	9	4	8	4	4
United Kingdom	41	38	-3	1	1	0

Appendix B: Results of the first empirical test using monthly per capita number of asylum applicants as independent variable

Table AIII: Results of the first empirical test with monthly per capita number of asylum applicants as independent variable

Country	Per capita asylum applicants between 01.06.2015 – 0.109.2016	Change in turnout (%)
Austria	0.01027	19.18
Croatia	0.0000497	11.19
Cyprus	0.00267	-11.96
Denmark	0.0037	-1.85
Estonia	0.000175	0.7
Finland	0.00591	3.32
Greece	0.00122	1.38
Ireland	0.0007	-3.3
Poland	0.000321	2
Portugal	0.0000863	-2.17
Slovakia	0.0000609	0.71
Spain	0.000318	4.26
United Kingdom	0.000619	0.68

Figure AI: Results of the first empirical test with monthly per capita number of asylum applicants as independent variable

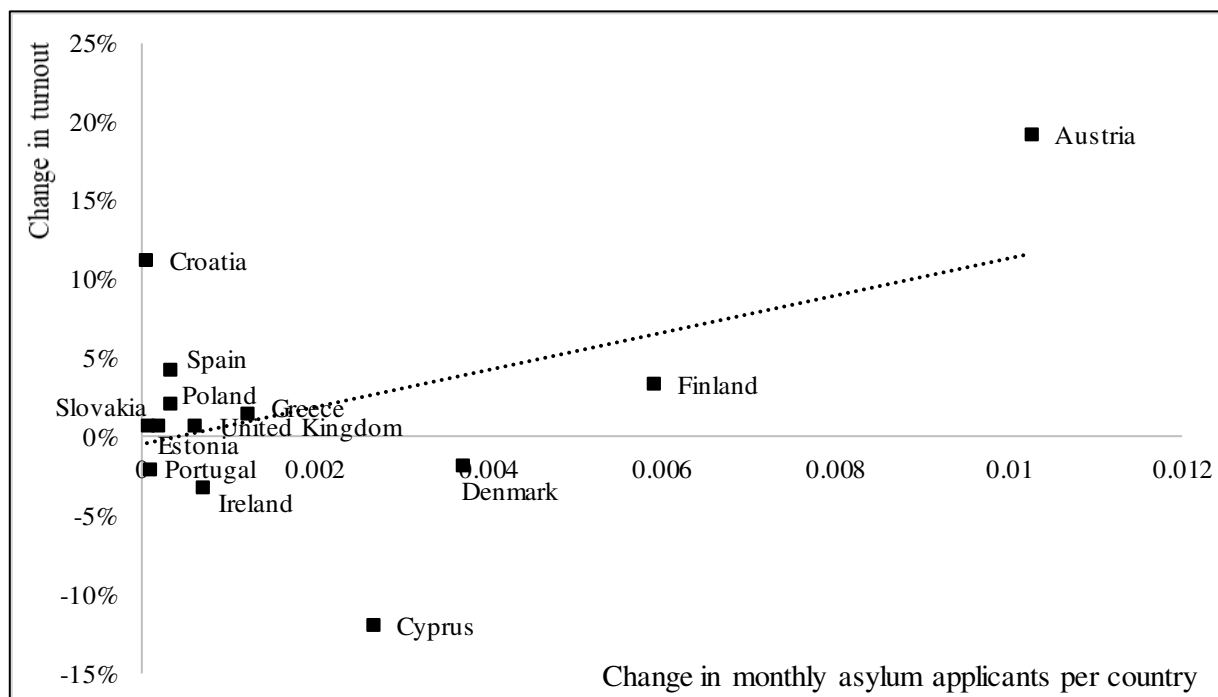
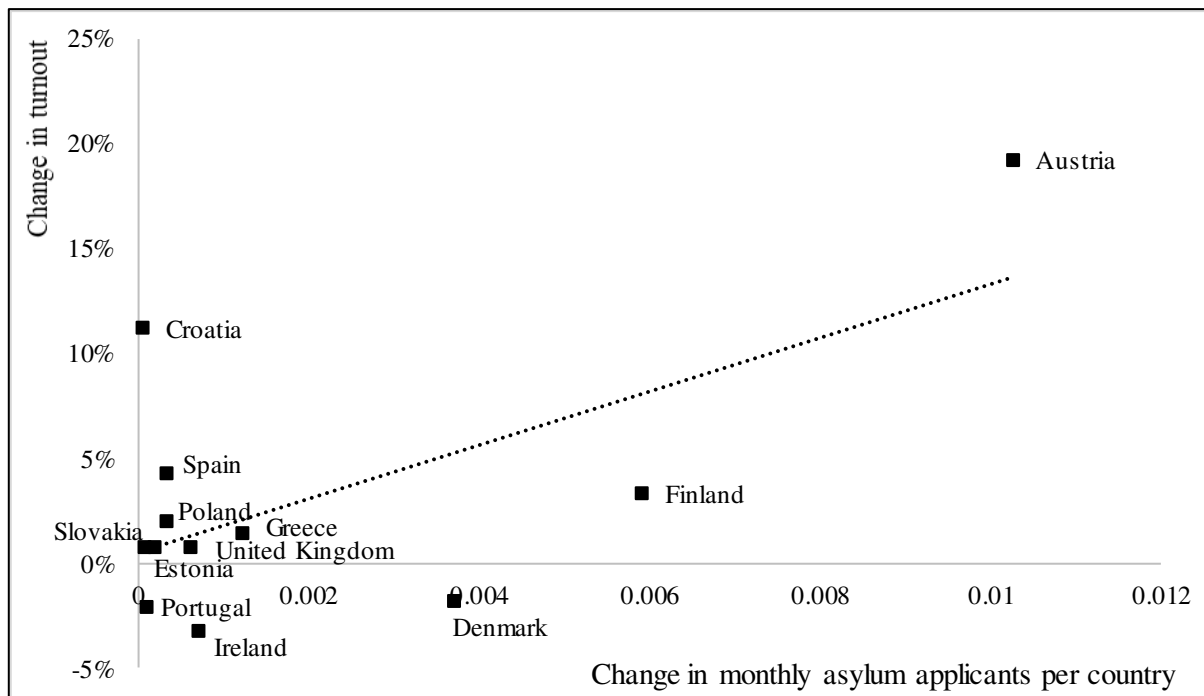
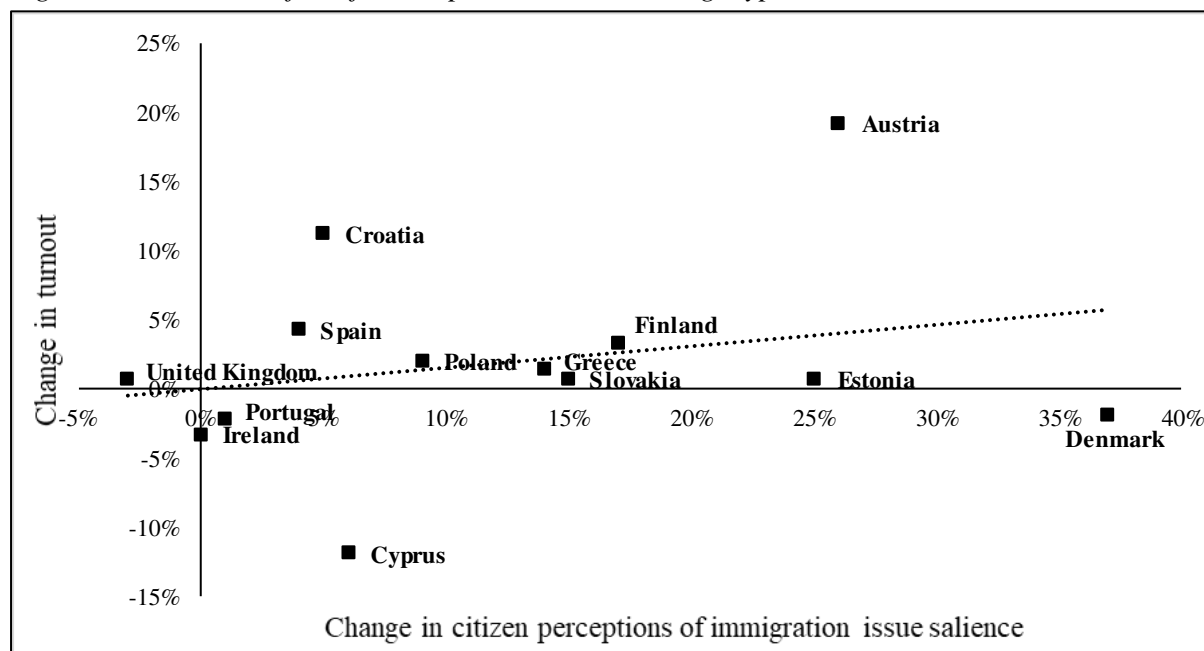


Figure AII: Results of the first empirical test with monthly per capita number of asylum applicants as independent variable without Cyprus, an outlier



Appendix C: Results of the first empirical test when outlier is included

Figure AIII: Results of the first empirical test including Cyprus



Appendix D: Dataset for the second empirical test

Table AIV: Dataset for the second empirical test, Estonia

	Proportion of respondents		Change in proportion of respondents
	ESS7	ESS8	
'Voted' among 'Agree' and 'Agree strongly'	63.5%	67.2%	3.7%
'Voted' among 'Neither agree nor disagree'	65.9%	71.3%	5.4%
'Voted' among 'Disagree' or 'Disagree strongly'	75.6%	73.0%	-2.6%
'Voted'	70.2%	72.1%	1.9%

Table AV: Dataset for the second empirical test, Finland

	Proportion of respondents		Change in proportion of respondents
	ESS7	ESS8	
'Voted' among 'Agree' and 'Agree strongly'	84.7%	82.8%	-1.8%
'Voted' among 'Neither agree nor disagree'	82.6%	86.6%	4.0%
'Voted' among 'Disagree' or 'Disagree strongly'	80.0%	81.1%	1.1%
'Voted'	83.0%	83.5%	0.5%

Table AVI: Dataset for the second empirical test, Ireland

	Proportion of respondents		Change in proportion of respondents
	ESS7	ESS8	
'Voted' among 'Agree' and 'Agree strongly'	75.0%	74.4%	-0.6%
'Voted' among 'Neither agree nor disagree'	74.1%	77.3%	3.2%
'Voted' among 'Disagree' or 'Disagree strongly'	79.3%	79.8%	0.6%
'Voted'	75.7%	76.1%	0.4%

Table AVII: Dataset for the second empirical test, Poland

	Proportion of respondents		Change in proportion of respondents
	ESS7	ESS8	
'Voted' among 'Agree' and 'Agree strongly'	71.3%	77.3%	6.0%
'Voted' among 'Neither agree nor disagree'	68.6%	71.5%	2.9%

'Voted' among 'Disagree' or 'Disagree strongly'	59.8%	73.8%	14.0%
'Voted'	69.6%	74.7%	5.1%

Table AVIII: Dataset for the second empirical test, United Kingdom

	Proportion of respondents		Change in proportion of respondents
	ESS7	ESS8	
'Voted' among 'Agree' and 'Agree strongly'	73.1%	80.0%	6.8%
'Voted' among 'Neither agree nor disagree'	69.4%	71.5%	2.1%
'Voted' among 'Disagree' or 'Disagree strongly'	68.8%	79.1%	10.3%
'Voted'	70.9%	77.6%	6.7%

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